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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

AFTER THE CESSATION OF HOSTILITIES

The cessation of hostilities (COH) between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) came into effect on January 08. This is a very significant step forward in the peace process initiated by President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Obviously, this was a personal political triumph for Kumaratunga and that claim was quite evident when it was first announced in the President's policy statement which she presented to parliament on January 06. The date of the commencement of the COH was also significant; it was the 96th birth anniversary of

Kumaratunga's father, the late Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike. The symbolism of coincidences is as important as the substance of an event.

The agreement for a cessation of hostilities appears to have been reached after much bargaining between the government and the LTTE. When the first round of talks between the two sides took place in January, the complexity of the peace process was not too evident.

Idealistic expectations and euphoria were the dominant sentiments during this first phase of the peace process. When it came to the nitty-gritty of the negotiation, however, issues became clearer and harder. The government and the LTTE approached the issue of negotiations from two perspectives, and of course they were competing perspectives. While the Kumaratunga government wanted to start immediately on negotiations for a political package to solve the ethnic problem, the LTTE took up a different position. Creating the

conditions for peace, according to the LTTE's reasoning, was a fundamental prerequisite for peace talks. Creating such conditions required action on two fronts, argued the LTTE: first a ceasefire and second, a return to normalcy which included reconstruction, rehabilitation and the resettlement of refugees. 'Address the war and its consequences first; this is necessary to create conditions of peace and normalcy for the people; once that climate has been established, then we can begin to address the causes of the war' was a formulation repeatedly put forward by the LTTE.

After a great deal of haggling, the understanding for a cessation of hostilities was arrived at in late December, well in time for President Kumaratunga to incorporate the news of it in her policy statement to Parliament. The agreement had a novel and welcome feature in that it provided for monitoring committees to ensure that violations, if they did occur, were investigated and dealt with without violence to the overall agreement.

This most important development in the peace process was however to evoke scepticism in some quarters. The press in Colombo generally implied that the period of cessation was being used by the LTTE to its advantage. There were numerous reports emanating from the Eastern province that the LTTE was regrouping its cadres, constructing new camps, smuggling in weapons and collecting and storing food and medicine. Some of these reports were clearly exaggerations. Nevertheless, independent accounts from people in

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the East indicated that tension was slowly building up there, and re-infiltration by the LTTE cadres was indeed a fact.

This is in a way an unavoidable reality, particularly because the mistrust between the two sides has not in anyway been diminished in the process of peace talks. One inevitable dilemma in any attempt to end a military conflict is the fear entertained by the warring parties of an eventual resumption of hostilities and the necessity to be prepared for any such eventuality. In the preliminary stages of a peace process, the general tendency is to subject peace initiatives to ultimate politico-military goals. Consequently, the merits or de-merits of each step may be evaluated by parties to the conflict in terms of gains and losses for their respective projects. This is precisely why Sri Lanka's current COH process needs to be strengthened so that the political process towards peace takes precedence over military matters.

It now appears that a number of irritants are delaying further progress in the peace talks. The LTTE wants three demands fulfilled by the government before new talks can begin. The three demands — opening of Pooneryn - Sangupiddy causeway, the total lifting of the economic embargo and the removal of the ban on sea fishing — are linked by the LTTE to its main argument of improving the day to day life of the people in the North. These demands have become irritants of a sort, because they have some military implications too. Re-opening of the Pooneryn - Sangupiddy causeway implies the removal of the Pooneryn army camp, maintained by the Sri Lankan army for the past three years; the total lifting of the economic embargo has been construed in Colombo as granting military concessions to the LTTE since a free flow of goods to the North will include the transport of cement and fuel, which are supposed to be war-related material; the objection to free fishing off the northern shores is that it will enable Sea Tigers to operate freely. So, the arguments put forward by both sides in this specific instance have equal validity. Hence the continuity of the irritants as irritants.

The government will therefore need to have a fresh look at the whole question of military implications of fulfilling civilian needs in the North. It cannot afford to procrastinate its plans to help the Jaffna population to return to a normal life. Since August last year, a new political dynamic has entered life in the North: after many years, people there are depending upon the government to take positive steps to end the war. And indeed, there has not been any war in the North since August 1994, and the Cessation of Hostilities has further consolidated the no-war situation. When people begin to enjoy a certain measure of normality in life without war, other aspirations also begin to set in. And these are not the aspirations of a consumerist society, but expectations of a decent and tolerable day to day life by a populace which has not had access to the basic needs of life for many years. People in the North actually crave for adequate food, medicine, clothes, electricity, transport and for facilities to rebuild

their war-damaged houses. They are terribly tired of a primitive subsistence economy and a life of a most spartan kind. And, they are looking upon the Colombo government, not the LTTE, as a source of help. Of course, these are the very expectations that the LTTE cannot fulfill.

The LTTE also finds itself in a gigantic dilemma, a credible way out of which they appear to be seeking. The LTTE's traditional and primary role in the North has been to 'protect the Tamil people' by military means, when the war was on. In a no-war situation, such protection has no immediate relevance. People, who no longer require protection from military aggression, have begun to develop other aspirations in life — aspirations connected with their basic needs. The LTTE, which has promised the fulfillment of 'national aspirations' of the Northern Tamil people, finds itself incapable of providing for the social aspirations of their own people. This in fact compels them to seek some way of linking up with the rest of the country. What they now seek is a way of negotiating this link in a way that will also enable them to continue to uphold the hegemony they have militarily established.

Resolving the ethnic conflict and bringing peace to the North will invariably mean re-establishing normal links between the government in Colombo and the people in the North. Throughout the past twelve years of war, the normal links between the government and a section of its citizenry had been torn asunder. Now, that same citizenry has built up hopes for better relations with the new government in Colombo. A meaningful humanitarian aid programme, aimed at alleviating the day to day suffering of the people in the North, will certainly build a North-South bridge and also increase the pressures for peace.

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